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AUTHOR Meyer, Margaret Dietz
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ABSTRACT

Designed for college freshman composition classes, this guide describes a writing assignment for teaching students to write a formal review of a favorite children's book. The book analysis worksheet serves as a springboard for questions and a vehicle for teaching persuasive discourse, the business of publishing, the organization of libraries, the commercial role of bookstores, and the criteria that make a book appropriate for readers of a particular age range. A guide for critiquing the book reviews is provided for peer evaluation. Finally, an essay evaluation scale covering ideas, organization, vocabulary, sentence structure, punctuation and mechanics, and spelling outlines the criteria for grading the revised version of the book review. (SRT)

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NEW YORK STATE

READING ASSOCIATION

Annual Conference

REVIEWING CHILDREN'S BOOKS ENHANCES COLLEGE STUDENTS' WRITING

Dr. Margaret Dietz Meyer

Ithaca College

November 7, 1985

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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The affective benefits of teaching college students how to write a formal review of a favorite children's book are as important as the cognitive aspects. The purpose of this presentation is to share a successful, classroom-tested unit plan. The audience who may find it of interest will include college teachers of reading and writing, college teachers of reading education, librarians, and high school teachers of reading and English.

College students in an introductory freshman writing/reading course greet this assignment with enthusiasm when they are treated as the young adults they are! One has to seize students' attention to attract their interest, and one way of doing this successfully is the "Prom Scenario" given here as an introduction to the unit.

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THE BOOK REVIEW Name:_____

Dr. Margaret Meyer

Introduction to Academic Writing

The conventions of writing a formal Book Review are like the conventions of dressing for a formal occasion. The men know what it's like to wear a tuxedo, complete with suspenders, cummerbund, cuff links, studs, and dress shoes. The women know what it's like to wear a long formal gown, complete with jewelry, flowers, small evening bag, and high heels. Conventions, therefore, have to do with use of language and writing style, or adherence to customs and behaviors that adults expect of each other on formal occasions.

Assignment

Read pages 145-146 and pages 174-197 in The Informed Writer. Then, select a children's book you enjoyed reading between the ages of seven and twelve, and read it. You will be writing a four-page, mid-length review. The review will be directed towards parents who are choosing books for their

children, aged seven to twelve. The object is to persuade another adult that the book of your choice is a good one for children to read.

Procedure

Use the questions in The Informed Writer, page 188 as a guide. When you can answer these questions, you will be ready to fill in the Book Analysis Form (Graded 1-10).

From the Book Analysis Form, write the outline. The format for the outline, rough draft, and final copy is found in The Informed Writer, pages 189-190. The final copy will be graded (1-24).

In the heading, after price, please write "Reviewed By: Your Name."

In general, it's best to write in the present tense. There will be no restriction on the number of paragraphs, although, as Bazerman shows, this type of review normally has five sections.

An Additional Step in this Assignment

The day the final copy is due, we will have an in-class Critique Session. Another person in the class will read and review your final copy before I do. A handout with specific questions will be provided. Your Critique of your friend's Book Review will be graded (1-10), but your Critique will not affect your friend's grade in any way.

* * * * * * * * *

Also, because students select the book they review, advance planning is advisable. A good strategy here is to announce and introduce the unit two weeks before midsemester vacation. This gives students a chance to think about what book they will choose, and more important, builds enthusiasm. Brainstorm! Let students talk about the children's book they would most like to persuade another adult is good for children to read. Then, focus a special, midsemester vacation homework assignment in this way:

(1) Make the decision: Choose your book;

(2) Get the book: Any source (except theft) is acceptable;

(3) Read the book;

(4) Bring the book to class the first day after vacation.

Encourage students to talk with their parents, to visit the children's book section in a local library, to look in bookstores, and to clean their bedrooms at home.

As we begin the central segment of the instructional process, I warn students that completing the Book Analysis form is not such a simple task as it may seem. We maintain the enthusiasm level by passing the books around in class, and relating them directly to the questions. This is the stage in the unit where the most new learning takes place. A suitable classroom nickname for the Book Analysis form is, "What Makes a Good Book Good?" As students share their background knowledge about the answers to this question, the teacher will usually notice three categories of understanding which the students lack.

The first is how to persuade, using both facts and feelings or opinions--while indicating clearly to the reader the significance of each. The second is factual knowledge about the business of publishing, the organization of libraries, and the commercial role of bookstores. The third is criteria which make a book appropriate for readers of a particular age range.

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Dr. Margaret Meyer

Introduction to Academic Writing

Book Analysis Name:_____

Book Number_____ Date:_____

1. Title and Author_____

2. Number of pages _____ Copyright date _____

3. Number of photographs _____, illustrations _____, charts _____, graphs _____, maps _____, or diagrams _____.

4. This book has the following parts: # of _____Chapters, Title Page, Table of Contents, Dedication, Forward, Preface, Introduction, Index, Appendix, Glossary, Bibliography, Concordance, Annotated Bibliography, Footnotes, Other _____.

5. Name the country or countries where the story takes place. If the book is non-fiction, give the nationality of the author.

_____.

6. Five vocabulary words new to a reader aged _____ might be:

a. _____ b. _____ c. _____

d. _____ e. _____

7. Type of book: Fiction, Non-fiction, Biography, Auto-Biography, Drama, Legend, Myth, Folk Tale, Horror, Animal, Auto, Aviation, Mechanics, Science Fiction, Poetry, Adventure, Sports, Romance, Art, Religion, History, Science, Anthology, Novel, Philosophy, Math, Reference, Mystery, Other _____.

8. In one sentence, describe the age, personality and purpose of the main character. If the book is non-fiction, tell these same three characteristics of the author.

_____

_____

9. In one sentence, describe what this book is about from beginning to end. (Plot)

_____

_____

10. In one sentence, tell why this book was written. (Author's purpose)

_____

_____

* * * * * * * * *

Thus, in this Unit Plan, designed for three weeks of scheduled class time before and after a week of vacation, it is not unusual to spend the greater part of three class hours discussing issues related to the books students have chosen. A useful source is Roser and Frith's (1983) Children's Choices. Use the Book Analysis as a springboard for questions, and as a vehicle for teaching the three categories of greatest need, persuasion, knowledge about books, and understanding of the criteria for analysis.

Although discussion of the basic elements of persuasion is beyond the scope of this paper, practitioners will realize that because student writers know they will be sharing a personal experience or feeling about a book of their own choosing, they will appreciate instruction which will help them persuade another adult that their personal reaction is valid. Indeed, the personal statements student writers make, to share with their future-parent peers, are often the most compellingly persuasive sections of these reviews--as we will see. Before students shape the outlines of their reviews, they inspect copies of The Guide for Critique; students know how the content of their reviews will be judged, and how they will judge each other.

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Introduction to Academic Writing

Dr. Margaret Meyer

Guide for Critique

Title: _____

Author: _____

Writer: _____

Reader: _____

Date: _____

Directions: Please answer the questions in the order in which they are asked. You may paraphrase the questions. How much should you write? Here are some suggestions.

Section 1 - one or two sentences

Section 2 - one to four sentences

Section 3 - one or two sentences

Section 4 - one sentence

Section 5 - three to five sentences

Conclusion - your choice, but probably two to five sentences

Section 1: Does the first paragraph convey enough specific interesting information to make you interested in reading more of the review?

Section 2: Does the reviewer give a clear overview of the book's contents? An indication of the audience? Mention any special purposes of the book? A general but clear hint of how well the reviewer likes (or dislikes) the book?

Section 3: Does the reviewer name the criteria by which he/she will evaluate the book? What ARE they? What is mentioned about the book and/or the author to give you further background information?

Section 4: Does the plot summary presented give you a good idea of what the book is about -- without retelling the entire story? In other words, is this an adequate summary?

Section 5: Does the reviewer evaluate how well the book has achieved its goal? Does the reviewer directly address the specific criteria he/she presented in Section 3? Does the reviewer share a personal or meaningful practical reaction, feeling, or experience related to the book? What is the

reviewer's personal or practical reaction to the book?

Conclusion: Are you persuaded that this is a good book for children to read? (You may answer "Yes," "No," or "Maybe.") Why? What was the most convincing part of this review -- i.e., what led you to form your opinion?

* * * * * * * * * * *

Grades, a measure of successful completion of a task, are no more or less important in this unit than in any other. The Book Analysis Form is graded 1-10. The outline is marked with a plus, a check, or a minus, supported by teacher comments and suggestions. The draft of the paper is also marked with a plus, a check, or a minus, according to a system of Correction Symbols developed by Rosemary Hake (1978, pp. 41-43). Student critiques of their peers' papers are graded 1-10; the emphasis is on accurate analysis of the content of a peer's review. Finally, polished versions of the Book Reviews are graded 1-24, according to the Essay Evaluation Scale (1981) used to grade all major papers of the semester.

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Essay Evaluation Scale

Ideas

4 A controlling thesis is clear and supported by relevant details. Ideas are solid and thought provoking.

3 Although the thesis is clear and supported by relevant details, the ideas are somewhat banal and thus less thought provoking.

2 The thesis is too general and is not fully developed. Examples are inadequate or irrelevant, or they are not unified by a controlling thesis.

1 Thesis is hard to make out or makes no sense at all.

Organization

4 Essay begins well, flows in a logical manner from one idea to the next, and ends conclusively. Appropriate transitions maintain a clear and consistent relationship among the parts of the essay, and the whole is unified.

3 Essay has a clear beginning, middle and end, but thesis statement, topic sentences and supporting details are not entirely focused. Paragraphing is logical, but clear transitions are not always provided.

2 Some plan or pattern is attempted in the essay, but focus is diffuse and the logic of the order of the presentation is not immediately clear. Thesis statement, topic sentences and supporting details are haphazard and the few transitions do not adequately create unity.

1 The essay is formless, with no logical sequence or plan evident. Weak or non-existent paragraphing; few or no transitions.

Vocabulary (includes all look alikes, sound alikes)

4 Words are used accurately and perceptively and are also appropriate to the topic. Wording is fairly sophisticated and promotes interest. No misuse of any word.

3 Words are used accurately, but are less sophisticated, reflect less insight, or are in a more conventional setting. OR: one misuse of a word.

2 Wording is fairly accurate, but repetitious and predictable. OR: two misuses of words.

1 Dick and Jane vocabulary: colorless. OR: three or more misuses.

Sentence Structure (Grammar: including gross errors such as run-ons, fragments, verb agreement, verb tense, pronoun errors.)

4 Sentence constructions are varied and, when appropriate, complex. Style is smooth and promotes interest and comprehension. No gross

grammatical errors.

3 Sentence constructions are usually correct, but are ordinary and relatively unvaried. Style is basically smooth, but not very sophisticated. One gross error possible.

2 Sentence constructions are usually correct, but are ordinary and relatively unvaried. Style is sometimes awkward, with convoluted constructions evident. No more than three gross errors.

1 Sentence constructions are elementary and monotonous. Four or more gross errors.

Punctuation, Mechanics (e.g., errors in possessives, contractions, capitalization, abbreviation, punctuation of introductory and modifying clauses and phases, etc.)

4 No errors.

3 Three errors possible.

2 More frequent errors but no more than five.

1 Six or more errors in punctuation and mechanics.

Spelling

4 No errors.

3 No more than 3 different misspellings.

2 No more than 5 different misspellings.

1 More than 5 different misspellings.

* * * * * * * * * * * *

Although grades are a measure of successful completion of a task, the affective benefits students accrue from sharing their values and experiences during the course of this unit of instruction are not only implicit, they can be quite explicit. In the fifth section of the reviews, students share a personal or meaningful reaction, feeling, or experience related to the book they have chosen to review.

For instance, in reviewing The Little Engine That Could, one student took the point of view of a salesman. "I feel this book started me off in becoming a confident person. . . . I play hockey today, and a hockey player must be sure of himself, or he won't be around to talk about it. . . . Furthermore, this book has been on the market for over thirty years, and that's consistency! . . . .Your child will cherish this book until the day he or she gives it to his or her child."

An international student shared a unique reaction to Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs. "The child does not necessarily have to be white, she may be black, but the name Snow White itself symbolizes innocence. . . . Because I am from Nigeria, I know there are different tribes such as the Christians and Muslims. Even though I am not from the Muslim tribe, I know the Muslims have a lot of wives because this is supposed to reflect their wealth. . . . Because there are intermarriages between both groups, I learned at an early age not to trust everyone. Some women try to kill each other's children because they are jealous. Snow White is lucky because she is saved, but some children are not lucky. In my culture, listening to authority is the main factor in family life. . . . Little children like to look up to people, and the most important people in their lives are their parents. . . . I realize that the book has a lot of meanings, even for adults, because they must realize that they are the ones who have to enforce authority and help their children understand the dangers jealousy brings."

On might expect that a young adult who was chubby as a child would have good reason to review Blubber, but there are other reasons why some children are the targets of cruel teasing and pranks by their peers. One students wrote, "Blubber really gets the message across. It explains the fact that teasing is very cruel, especially when it has to do with something that can not be helped, such as obesity or the size of a nose. I have had

rhinoplasty now, but I grew up being teased about having a large nose. Every day people called me 'banana-nose,' and/or when I got into a fight with someone, all they would say was 'nice nose!' The torment I was subjected to made me miserable. When I read Blubber, I totally related to Linda because I could associate with the humiliation that she was experiencing. . . . My mother bought it (Blubber) for me when I was going through hard times in my life. . . . This book and others by Judy Blume present children with situations before they may actually occur, so children are aware and can cope more easily with a problem. . . . I feel it (Blubber) can benefit your child as it did me."

Not all the books students choose to write about are fiction. "The book Pistol Pete Maravich by Bill Gutman tells about how a person can overcome a lot of pressure and animosity. The book tells and teaches the audience about how a father-son relationship can help a person develop the skills and abilities to be successful in life. An 11 or 12 year-old boy would find this book inspiring, exicting, extertaining, and stimulating. I can relate to this because when I was a boy, Pete was my idol. I used to share the same things with my father that Pete did. My father is deceased now, but I look back at all the times he taught me, pushed me, and worked with me so that I could become successful at whatever I did."

The pain of the loss of a relative or close friend can be assuaged to some degree, as a student described in a review of Sea Star. "I feel this book prepared me as a child for friendships, how to feel when a friend has to go, and how much time and effort have to be put into friendship. For example, Sea Star prepared me for a loss because when I was in fifth grade, my best friend moved to North Carolina. I was faced with making new friends. This book can help children adapt to a similar situation and understand what friendship means. I feel this book is excellent at teaching children the

pain of losing a friend and the adventure of gaining a new one."

Finally, a single story can teach a multi-faceted lesson, as explained by one particularly articulate student reviewer. "I feel that Peter and The Wolf is a fairy tale that many children should read. Because of the easy reading level and descriptive pictures, youngsters learn to enjoy reading and learn that books can capture exciting moments. The lessons are of major importance in order for children to function effectively in life. Teamwork is needed in school, family life, sports, projects, and occupations. People constantly face problems, and it is important that they work effectively with others in order to solve them. For me, an obstacle was a neighborhood bully. The situation became so uncomfortable for me that I was afraid to leave my house. The bully, Chuck, weighed 230 pounds and was five years older than my friends and I. Both my friends and I, being afraid of Chuck, decided to stand up to him together. By combining forces, we were able to play outside once again. Together, we did not have to worry about being caught alone. Many people never face their problems and live their lives being manipulated by others. This lesson is exposed in Peter and The Wolf. Peter does what he wants and is successful because of strong determination and teamwork."

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